Seniors in Commercials - A Semio-Stylistic Approach

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Abstract

The present paper is meant to highlight some semiotic and stylistic features that appear in commercials that involve senior citizens in Romania. The cultural background plays an important part, especially that commercials featuring people of an advanced age mirror the way society perceives or is expected to perceive the seniors.

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1. Introduction

“One picture is worth a thousand words. Yes, but only if you look at the picture and say or think the thousand words” – William Saroyan

The present paper is concerned with the semio-stylistic analysis of a set of commercials that appeared on Romanian television and that were considered relevant for the purpose of our study.

The growing number of products appearing on the market and the need to enlarge the sales explains the need to present them to the large public. People of different ages are allured to buy products via many media including television, radio commercials, newspapers, billboard and internet advertisements. Involving audio and visualization, in line with the technological developments, television has become one of the most attractive media.

Mature consumers are a part of the Romanian audience who sometimes witness discrimination in favor of the

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younger ones. By mature consumers we understand people whose color hair is grey or white, having skin wrinkles apparent on their face and hands, or being in a context suggesting retirement. Our study will focus on a number of commercials considered representative for the way the silver generation is perceived and represented in commercials. By analyzing commercials from a semiotic and stylistic point of view, we tried to highlight some clichés and stereotypes attached to old agers. We have chosen both Romanian and international advertisements that appeared on television in 2012, 2013 and the beginning of 2014. As compared to the commercials addressing younger generations, those involving seniors are restricted to a limited number of products that can be related either to health and remedies or to some attributes considered specific to the old age. This limitation can be interpreted as a proof of discrimination, considering the fact that the demographic trend clearly shows the increase in number of the older people and also that “the audience needs to identify with a personal experience, either vicariously or intellectually, with the people, emotions, places and situations presented on the screen.” (Shelton, 2004) Nevertheless, it is not just the number of seniors which is important, but how this segment of population appears represented and, consequently, the way it is perceived by the others. Viewed as part of our social identities, our age identities are formed by social processes and are affected by the expectations of the society, which appear reflected in commercials as well (Virpi, Williams, & Wadleigh, 2009).

2. Methodology

In this section I will outline the method of researching the representation of older people in Romanian television advertising, and also I will present the results of the steps undertaken.

2.1. Purpose of the Study

I have chosen television advertising for because no other medium is consumed as frequently as it and because for mature people it is the handiest. Taking into account the phenomenon of demographic aging (Demetrescu, 1994), the representation of older people in commercials can undoubtedly offer a valuable insight as far as the way older people are perceived and treated.

2.2. Research Methods and Findings

The research method I used takes into account the complexity of commercials, as audio-video products. The selection of the commercials was not concerned with aspects such as whether they were dedicated to local brands or to global ones. The main criterion refers to the presence of older people in audio-visual commercials, not in printed media or else. Such commercials add visual to verbal expressivity and, consequently, allow a more comprehensive approach.

Throughout the present research I will answer some questions meant to organize results and to verify the following hypothesis:

- there are negative stereotypes in what concerns the silver generation, betraying a certain attitude at the level of the Romanian society;
- there is a balance between commercials featuring older people and those in which they appear accidentally or episodically;
- there is a direct connection between the product advertised and the needs of mature consumers.

2.2.1. Advertising and stereotyping

Television has an important impact on our culture. Social roles in industrial societies are dictated by mass media, television forming the common mainstream of our culture (Shimp, 2000). Advertising can be defined as a system of signs. The meaning of an advert derives from the way these signs are organized. Semiotics attempts to reveal how commercials work as their meaning cannot be said to be extremely overt all the time. Advertisements are a steady, repetitive and compelling system of messages perpetuating stereotypes (Hummert, Gartska, Shaner, & Strahm, 1995) and they serve as a true lexicon of current cultural meanings.
By stereotypes we understand knowledge structures in long-term memory containing and individual’s belief related to a certain concept. Concerning elderly people, stereotypes can be either positive or negative. Such beliefs are rooted in cultural strong feelings, being the consequence of social interaction.

2.2.2. Semiotic Analysis

At the core of semiotics lies the realization that everything concerning the human experience has to do with signs (Langrehr). A sign can be a word, a sound, or a visual image. The three types of signs according to Pierce (iconic, symbolic and indexical) are present in visual communication. Television advertisements include both verbal and nonverbal signs, which help the viewer form an opinion about the product. The study of commercials means deciphering the framing of meaning, as they are always contextual. Thus, the semiotic analysis of ads materializes the need of “making meanings from linguistic and visual signs” (Bulut & Yurdaişık).

In order to achieve the goal of the present study, I have taken into consideration several questions:

1. What are the products in which older people appear?
2. What symbols can there be found in the visual images?
3. How are the elements carrying different types of semiotic meaning related to the linguistic message?

2.2.1. Stylistic Analysis

A very great impact on the consumer is given by the visual content. However, language plays an important part as well, in that it helps people to identify and remember a certain product. Stylistic analysis refers to the identification of some patterns of usage in speech and writing (Wales, 1989). It is concerned with the idea of uniqueness of a text, namely with what is especially particular for delivering the message. By using the art of language, advertisements achieve amazing effects on persuading the audience to buy products. We can identify the following levels of stylistic analysis: sound/graphological, semantic and syntactic. As far as the graphological level is concerned, style markers play an important role in attracting the audience’s attention, rendering it outstanding among other product advertisements. Phonologically speaking for instance, one technique for bringing in the brand name is to make the slogan rhyme with it. Using this type of rhyming the brand name is highlighted. At the semantic/lexical level, the extensive usage of affirmative and commendatory words is meant to seduce (Turner, 1973). At the syntactic and grammatical level, the use of complex and compound sentence is intended to offer details about the product and to give as much information as possible about what makes the product more special than others. Usage of interrogations arouses people’s attention, the present tense indicates the good quality of the products and its long-lasting and ever-lasting effect (Li, 2009).

2.2.2. Findings

According to the type of product advertised, we can classify the commercials portraying older people into four categories:

- Advertisements for food items: Merci Chocolate Bars, Timioreana Beer, Oil from Grandmother, Jacobs Coffee, Poiana Chocolate, Mars Chocolate Bar, Ardealul Vegetal P té
- Advertisements for household goods: Dry Cooker Pan
- Health aids advertisements: - denture care items: Fixodent, Corega, nutritional or diet supplements: Catena Pharmacy, Centrofarm Pharmacy, pain relief items: Voltaren liniment; heart problems: Aspenter,
- Other purchases: Cosmote services, Academia Caţavencu magazine, Das Welt Auto

The verbal message of the ads in discussion is delivered in Romanian. The only foreign word that appears in one of them is “merci”, a French word, used for a German chocolate bar brand, contradicting the general belief that English is most appreciated by ad consumers due to the positive associations and stereotypes (Horniks et al., 2010). In this case, French refinement underlies the consideration and appreciation message of offering the individually
wrapped chocolate box. The paradigmatic choice of an elderly woman for the role of perfect grandmother is in line with the traditional role of women as nurturers of children.

The language is used to reinforce the filmed sequence: a grandson comes to his grandma who has just finished sowing a T-shirt for him. The boy turns to his mother very excited. The next scene represents the climax: the grandson offers his grandma a box of “Merci” chocolate. The last scene represents the boy’s mother embracing the grandmother as a token of her thankfulness and indebtedness. Both of them look at each other and at the box of chocolate and smile. The voice over speaks about the quality of the product advertised. The dominant lexical set is that of refinement (“pleasure to choose”, “unique collection”) and high quality (“fine chocolate”). There are more visual images than written captions due to the fact that pictures speak for themselves, having the ability to communicate the mood.

The audio content of each commercial, including what was said by/to and/or about each of the elderly/product helps the coding of traits. The lyrics of the song in the Merci advert suggest the close relationship between people who offer and those who receive such a chocolate: the second person singular of the verb “to be”, and of the personal pronoun connote a close relationship based on love and appreciation.

The color plays a significant role in the syntagmatic structure of the commercials. A specific color may occur many times, linking the different paradigms together to join separate paradigms with a view to obtaining a phrase that has continuity. Color contains a rich symbolic significance, as it can be used to nonverbally and inexplicitly link concepts together (Lacey, 1998). The recurring color in Merci commercial (red on a white background) can be read as standing for love, devotedness, but it can also be deciphered as a means of drawing attention to an extremely good food product. This color appears on the T-shirt (red and white strips), on the wrapper of the individual chocolate bar; on the box of chocolate and, last but not least, on the heart-shaped dot.

The commercial for Ardealul vegetal pté have male protagonists and the message of their story speaks about excellence and tradition. If older women appear giving advice (as in Dry Cooker ad), it is men who appear more frequently as experts. The exception seems to be the grandmother in the oil commercial. Females appear sometimes viewed as motherly (Merci, Jacobs coffee, Oil from Grandmother), and males appear authoritative and dignified (Timoreana 2012, Ardealul Vegetal Pté). Very few portrayals of older people are rendered negatively, both genders being regarded as friendly, serious and having positive attitudes.

Humorous ads featuring older men or women speak about enjoying life. Their slogans contain semantic traits such as [+ Indulgence]: “Taste the small pleasures!”, “Taste life heartily!”. The use of imperative stresses the urge to give the beautiful part of a try.

The aim of the ad for the Dry Cooker Pan is to persuade the consumer that they want to be included in the category the ad is marketed at. The ad seems to sell a healthy lifestyle, a way of life together with the product (Dyer, 1982). The Dry Cooker pan is recommended by the small amount of time spent for cooking, by the small quantity of oil needed (thus connoting the idea of a healthy lifestyle so much needed especially when you are no longer young) and also by the little money spent when cooking with this pan. The last detail in the presentation could suggest that all older people are not wealthy and therefore cannot afford to purchase all the products or services they might want. Such exposure to commercials which carry a negative subtext could lead to an overall devaluation of the seniors.

Cosmote “War Hero” commercial somehow subverts the viewer’s expectation: it opens with the image of some young men grouped near their friends sitting on a bench. They are relaxed and have fun and one of them is pushed by another one. He trips up an old man with a cane and a bunch of flowers who was going past them. The eyes of the old man meet those of the young man in green T-shirt. The latter follows him and sees him taking the flowers to a monument. In that moment he uses his mobile phone and finds out the man’s story. The old man is the protagonist of the advertisement. He connotes experience and respectability. Nevertheless, the young man with a green T-shirt is the one who deciphers the code: he surfs the net on his phone and finds out the story of the old man: he is a hero. The next day the same group of young men greets the hero with a crisp salute. This is the story: the message is encoded in the written text that appears on the screen at the end of the commercial: “Untold stories must be discovered”. The next image presents details about the services offered by Cosmote. The first line in this image with useful details for the prospective purchasers is linked to the message of the ad: “Connect to them!” At the lexical level, the paradigmatic choice of the verb “to connect” foreshadows one of the services advertised (internet connection), the underlying idea being that of necessity to have such services. The details concerning the various
services offered by Cosmote appear in a box that represents the outline of a mobile phone. Every message is made up of two levels of meaning: the surface and the deep level. The second one is called by R. Barthes “a coded iconic or symbolic message” (Dyer, 1982). At the surface level, the viewer understands the type of product advertised. The connotation of this image renders evident the complexity of the product: it is vital to anyone who wants to understand the world around.

As far as the location of the commercial is concerned, the mature characters appear in the following locations: home setting (having the domestic setting as background): Merci, Dry Cooker, Oil from Grandmother, Aspenter; recreational/social setting (indoor locations may include restaurants, movie or theater, sporting events, while outdoor locations may include parks, yards, natural outside settings featuring vegetation, animals and water): Cosmote, Das Welt Auto, Catena Pharmacy, Jacobs Coffee, Voltaren liniment; professional setting (factory or service-oriented business, office building setting): Timioreana Beer, Ardealul Vegetal P te; a health care setting (any place where the elderly appear as patients or as receivers of health care, advise, information, sometimes carrying the connotation that this age category as sickly or frail): Centrofarm Pharmacy, Catena Pharmacy.

Negative stereotypes of the elderly very frequently place them in home settings, or in situations in which they complain or just act as victims. Thus television commercials are involved in the process of influencing the audience not to respect the elderly, as “Negative stereotyping of the elderly circumscribes their potential by placing emphasis on the unproductive and unsuccessful older person and may become a self-fulfilling prophecy limiting capacities and experiences of aged persons. Negative stereotyping and ageism not only affect the elderly but also create negative expectations, fear, and dread of aging in the young” (Vasil & Wass, 1993). The only negative stereotype found in the commercials on Romanian television is that of the mildly impaired mature person, characterized as fragile and worried in the first part of the ad, then appearing as lively, active and determined in the second half (Kosmodisk, Voltaren).

The positive stereotypes associated to the elderly are: perfect grandparent (family-oriented, generous, happy, healthy, supporting, wise, understanding, kind, intelligent): Merci, Kosmodisk, Jacobs Coffee, Oil from Grandmother; golden ager (conscious, intelligent, interesting, active, adventurous): Catena ads, Das Welt Auto, activist (liberal, old-fashioned, mellow): Timioreana Beer, Academia Catavencu Magazine, Aspenter, Ardealul Vegetal P te; conservative (emotional, mellow, patriotic, curious): Cosmote “War Hero”, Cosmote “Butterfly”.

Taking into account the number of commercials advertising products for improvement of health as compared to the other categories, one can easily remark that the elderly are depicted as having considerably more physical ailments than younger people. Nevertheless, older people appear in terms of positive stereotypes in these commercials. The adverts for medicines make it possible for the silver generation to use health information offered by the others. Such ads situate the elderly as a clearly defined category of people by constructing some specific problems, interests and age-related needs. There are some difficulties and problems that can be satisfactorily managed: some people need help to improve their mobility. The slogan of Voltaren liniment is “The joy of movement”, the product promising ease, comfort and independence. Lack of independence is one of the main problems of ageing people.

A very frequent theme present in this category of adverts is that of staying younger, healthy and active. All the adverts for Catena pharmacy chain share this theme. Another idea appearing in the ads with/for the elderly is that of pride in appearance. It is the case of Corega and Fixodent adverts, some of the few that focus on appearance and cosmetic issues. All the commercials including health issues seem to connote the promise of the regaining past pleasures and the idea that it is the ageing person’s responsibility to take care of the way he maintains his good health.

Seniors appear in three roles: a major role (they are protagonists or spokespersons and appear on camera throughout the ad, having a speaking role: Merci, Oil from Grandmother, Cosmote Services, Dry Cooker Pan, Catena Pharmacy, Voltaren liniment), a minor role (they seldom speak or not at all, appearing for half the duration of the ad: Centrofarm Pharmacy) or a background role (they are more or less part of the scenery, having a brief appearance on camera: Jacobs Coffee).
3. Conclusions

Television advertising plays a major part in the shaping of attitudes and in the influence on younger audience’s view of older people. For some reason, many commercials fail to portray seniors as successfully dealing with a difficulty. They portray them as wise people, making good decisions as far as their health is concerned. Nevertheless, in a few cases, the older people are suggested to be vulnerable and weak. Such negative stereotyping are harmful for the concept itself of the elderly, damaging the relationship between younger generations and the mature one (Smith, Moschis, & Moore, 1984). On the whole, the elderly are portrayed in a positive manner. Very few stereotypes could be found, advertisers proving not to be socially irresponsible in their rendering of the mature people. There have been found positive stereotypes such as: the perfect grandparent, the productive golden ager, the activist and the conservative. Based on the scenario in the ad, one might judge that the older people in the commercials are fun / loving / happy / lively and sociable.

The impact of television advertising on viewers and society in general is undisputable and it implies a considerable amount of social responsibility. The present analysis of commercials involving mature people highlighted only several aspects. The concept itself of being a senior leads to the conclusion that it is very difficult to avoid clichés – it is difficult to portray old people without having in mind a gray-haired person’s concerns about heart diseases. Also, related to the misrepresentation of the elderly in commercials, it is true that it not obligatory for ads to represent age groups in true proportions, as their aim is to sell products, not to promote social harmony.

References